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Distance Education Initiative for Ethiopia

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Background

In Ethiopia the last three decades have been marred with political, social and economic turmoil. These decades have also witnessed a significant decline in the education system of the country. The system has failed miserably to keep up with demand. Among the major contributing factors for the deterioration of the educational system are the growth in enrollment, lack funding for infrastructure and innovation. For example primary school enrollment increased from about 957,300 in 1974/75 to nearly 2,450,000 in 1985/86. (Country Studies, 1996) According to government statistics during the same period primary schools grew from 3,196 to 7,900. These numbers are highly suspect since most of these schools were significantly low in quality and staffed by teachers who had little or no formal training in childhood education. Exasperating the already strained educational system were misguided government policies that lead to the nationalization of private schools, the micromanagement of education forms elementary through college levels and sudden changes in medium of instruction (from Amharic to Oromiffa). Added to these problems is that Ethiopian students will now have to write their examinations for secondary school leaving certificate in the 10th grade instead of two years later. As a result of this change, the 200,000 Grade 10 pupils in the country took school-leaving exams in May 2001. According to the new educational structure, there will be a kindergarten system for children aged 4-6, a primary education from grades 1-8, subdivided into two sections of basic 1-4 and general 5-8 education, a general secondary education from 9-10, a preparatory senior secondary education of two years and a system of vocational and technical education. There are 8,120 primary schools in a country of 62 million people with an enrolment of about three million. Most of these schools are in the urban areas, which have 15 percent of the population. Most of the 1,378 junior and senior secondary schools with an 800,000 enrolment are located in the medium and large towns. There are 17 technical/vocational schools with some 4,000 students. According to observers, "The number of schools, the type and variety of vocations and the quality of training are far below the needs and demands of the country. Most of the 16 special education schools are run by NGOs and are far below the requirements of the community, Most of the schools are ill- equipped and very crowded with over 100 students per class and about 7,000 students per school. Nearly all the senior secondary schools and all the primary schools conduct more than one shift of class. The educational facilities are rudimentary. Most schools have no libraries and adequate laboratories or workshops. The supply and utilization of education technology such as radio, TV, other audio-visuals and computers are virtually non-existent." The effects of such policies would be the next political and economic battlegrounds. Under adverse political, economical, and social conditions how can educated Ethiopians both at home and abroad contribute to the education of the future generations? . Distance education is capable of addressing some of the critical aspects good education in Ethiopia for the following simple reasons

1. It has the potential to reach a large number of people in very short time
2. It has a built in flexibility that allows targeting specific issues, audiences and in choosing delivery strategy
3. It can be significantly cost effective

The Distance Education Initiative

The Internet is the largest most powerful computer network in the world. This new medium has opened up a whole new world of communication. It has proved to be an invaluable tool for free flow of information. (Huges, K.,1994) Although computer network technology in general is relatively costly to develop (University of Idaho, 1995), countries such as Ethiopia can not afford to ignore this rapidly changing technology. There are quite a few issues to be addressed: infrastructure, access, highly trained IT personnel, content providers, organization, virtual university, and target audience. Addressing these issues requires a substantial investment and commitment in part of national and international institutions.

The situation

1. There is no distance learning organization which represents the interests of students, educators, content providers, and lobbies for a better distance education program in Ethiopia
2. There does not exist an accredited virtual or Open University,
3. There is a very limited infrastructure
4. Because of the inadequacy of training materials and computers, a very limited number of students are graduating in IT related fields.
5. There are no content providers except those coming through the African Virtual University

EDLA, IOCE and the Volunteers

I propose the establishment of the Ethiopian Distance Learning Association (EDLA) and the International Open College of Ethiopia (IOCE). These organizations are proposed out of the strong belief that the situation outlined above can and will be addressed by volunteers. EDLA, IOCE and the volunteers are committed to laying down the foundation upon which full scale Internet based distance education could be delivered to Ethiopia. The purpose of EDLA is to facilitate and promote education for every Ethiopian and others interested in matters pertaining to the proliferation of distance education in all academic disciplines. I envision several possible functions for IOCE: For example it will maintain Databases of Expertise, Clearing house of online courses (Ethiopian Lecture Hall), Course delivery systems (registration, file sharing, management, tutorials, lecture notes, testbank), Online colloquium, seminars and discussions on

critical topics, Online scientific publications which could lead to major national peer reviewed journal and Creating communities of learners and educators. In concrete terms EDLA and IOCE have the following advantages

1. Enable volunteer teachers scattered throughout the world to participate without necessarily assembling them in one place
2. Help volunteer teachers practice their skills and refine the course materials that could be delivered to schools and colleges in Ethiopia
3. Along with education comes, the accessibility of the Ethiopian youth and parents to Ethiopian educators, whereby advising the youth to peruse critical career paths. For example high school students can be advised to major in the pure and applied sciences, medicine, international relations, etc.
4. Bring together the best minds in any field for collaborative research and education efforts. For example the recent establishment of networks such as AAU-Network and discipline based networks opened up the possibility of collaborating with educators and researchers in Ethiopia.
5. Help Ethiopians born and raised outside of Ethiopia learn their heritage, history and culture from leading specialists.
6. Help those who for various reasons were unable to pursue higher education to do so from the comfort of their keyboards
7. Provide a platform for community of learners and teachers. Several hundred virtual faculty members can teach a single course, and the course can be taken by thousands of students.
8. Serve as an electronic warehouse of information to business and researches on issues related Ethiopia, it people and history.
9. Assist Ethiopian institutions in selecting appropriate course materials for their use. For example do participants of the African Virtual University have control over the type courses and content of courses that are delivered to them? How are these courses accredited? EDLA and IOCE can play a major role in brokering the best courses suitable for the institutions in Ethiopia
10. Empower traditional institutions to develop their own distance education strategies without compromising or minimizing their leadership role in all aspects of education
11. Contribute to the advancement of education, science and culture of the global Ethiopian community through online publications

Why Volunteers?

Although the introduction of western style education may have been foreign to Ethiopia, the concept of education itself was not. Ethiopia has a long rich tradition of education especially in theology. For centuries the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its clergy have served as custodians and gatekeepers of knowledge. The most remarkable thing about ancient Ethiopian education was the fact that in most cases teachers were unpaid professionals who chose to be teachers for its intrinsic value. EDLA and IOCE are based on this long Ethiopian tradition of volunteerism. We believe that the fundamental prerequisite to any intellectual endeavor is independent critical thinking. In its simplest and elemental form IOCE's mission can be viewed as being an effort to enrich our tradition of independent critical thinking through modern education. The central theme for establishing IOCE is our belief that it should be the right of every Ethiopian to be educated and it should be the duty of every educated Ethiopian to teach others. In Ethiopian terms EDLA and IOCE are dedicated to the cause of "yetemare yastemer, yaltemare yemar" which translates as "let the educated teach and let the uneducated learn".

Specific Initiatives

1. Workshops and Conferences: It is imperative that a large number of workshops and conference must be conducted to identify specific problem areas, where EDLA and IOCE can contribute best
2. Networked web based lectures and test bank for Learning Assessment: This initiative is targeted towards assisting higher education institutions in Ethiopia, in assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum. Particularly the assessment of the performance of the student in two or more related fields. Volunteers will collaborate to develop lectures, demonstrations and tests in a given field of study
3. Introduction to Biotechnology: The subject of biotechnology is impacting everyday life in academe and ethics. We need to develop appropriate scientific materials to bring awareness, and the implications of genetically altered seeds from the point of view of ownership and productivity
4. HIV AIDS: Developing materials on the issue of HIV AIDS, to raise awareness
5. Tutorials for Science, Mathematics, Engineering and Technology students: It is understood that the quality and the number of highly skilled workers will determine the vitality of our institutions. Volunteers in these fields will develop online tutorials to help Ethiopian students succeed in those fields.
6. Developing teaching and learning materials in Space Science and Astronomy
7. Collaboratively develop training materials for vocational schools
8. Introduce outreach programs for youngsters who are not admitted to the vocational schools, high school dropouts and those who have no access to education. This can be done collaboratively with established schools at all levels.
9. Develop virtual libraries for all Ethiopian Schools.

10. Conduct professional development workshops for Ethiopian Teachers at all levels

Content and Cost

At this time several schools around the world are developing online courses and delivery for their continuing Education programs. The delivery portals provide features to manage the courses, syllabi, tests, quizzes, homework, discussions and tutorials. Most of these courses are not for free. There are two major costs 1) the cost to develop the courses and 2) the cost to manage the courses. These costs add up to make taking a course online more expensive. MIT recently has come up with a solution, which may address the cost involved in development. It has been reported that "MIT OpenCourseWare (OCW) will make the course materials that are used in the teaching of virtually all of MIT's courses available on the Web, free of charge, to any user anywhere in the world. Depending on the particular course or the style in which the course is taught, this could include material such as lecture notes, course outlines, reading lists, and assignments for each course". I do believe that a large number of institutions for higher learning will do the same. Therefore, in the near future, the jobs of IOCE volunteers would be to fashion and organize the materials for delivery. Training materials for vocational schools can be developed in collaboration with prominent community colleges around the world, or relevant technical training courses will be brokered for use in Ethiopia. Once EDLA and IOCE are formally organized some of the costs associated with royalties, and costs beyond the course development such as web maintenance will be subsidized through grants, membership fees and revenues obtained for services IOCE would provide. The services would include organization and delivery of workshops, symposia, conferences and preparation of specific educational materials. The costs to the potential student can also be subsidized through scholarship provided by the Ethiopian Philanthropy Organizations such as the Ethiopian Foundation for Education as well as financial aid

Limitations: the present and the future

I believe that the future of Internet based distance education in Ethiopia can not be measured by the present. Through various medium of communications it has been argued that the absence of infrastructure, access and cost will be the limiting factors for effective internet based education. The present scenario clearly shows these factors are prevalent. Addis Ababa University faculty and students are sharing email accounts. For example the Department of Physics has only one account, both for its students and faculty. The Ethiopian Telecommunication Authority is the only internet provider. According to African Internet Connectivity, AISI -Connect ICT profile of Ethiopia, the dial up time for ICT students is 20 hrs/month. There are 2500 dial up subscribers and 10,000 people are in the waiting list. With this being the case then it appears internet based distance education is ineffective at this time. Frustrating at it may seem at the present time, we must prepare and practice so that when the conditions allow we can directly go to the business of providing quality education

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